

Viewpoint: Israel, Gaza, the Return of an ‘Emboldened Iran’ – and Obama

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Introduction

A curious pattern characterizes the recent military adventures in the Middle East. Overwhelming and disproportionate force is utilized in the name of a temporarily popular objective—combating terrorism, preventing WMD-proliferation, restoring deterrence, bringing democracy and so on. But once the human costs and efficacy of attacks in terms of stated objectives begin to be questioned, the narrative shifts and the argument for the sustenance of war, refusal of ceasefire, or even the need for “victory” begins to rely on the line that if a certain party or organization in question is not crushed, all the extremist forces in the Middle East led by Iran will be emboldened.

The justification for the continuation of violence changes and the putative objective becomes, above all, to ensure that Iran does not expand its influence in the region as the leader of regional “resistance.” Even if one objected to the initial military foray, it is said, there should be agreement that leaving the mess in the middle and not finishing the job—whatever that means—will lead to the worst of all possible worlds: an angrier crowd that is allowed to survive and cause mischief at the direction of hegemony-seeking Iran.

In its latest version, we are told by no less a figure than Israeli president Shimon Peres, “Our goals are clear. We do not want to make Gaza a satellite of Iran.” Other Israelis like Michael Oren and Yossi Klein Halevi, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, have gone further. To them, the war against Hamas is not only a war to check Iran’s ambition but also a push pack, giving Israel and the Western alliance “a unique chance to deal a strategic blow to Iranian expansionism.”

I am not going to dwell on the insanity or immorality of violence imposed on a defenseless people based on a future possibility. The callous squander of lives and livelihoods in Iraq, Lebanon, and now Gaza speak for themselves. And, as far as we know, no one is claiming that the lengthening of violence in Iraq or Lebanon stopped the presumed process of emboldening Iran.

My bet, like almost everyone else’s at this point, is that whatever the result in Gaza, it will do little to change the narrative one way or another. There is nothing in the cards to suggest that what has not worked in the past will magically work today. If anything, Israel will emerge out of this latest adventure less secure and because of that more destabilizing to the region which these days contains a good-sized population of Americans.

Hamas as an organization is likely to survive. And in an era in which mere survival against what is perceived to be an uncontrolled Behemoth is considered victory, its fortunes or the fortunes of

elements even more bent on “resistance” will rise within Palestinian politics and this will be considered yet another feather in Iran’s—or “the leader-of-the-resistance-camp’s”—cap; a feather Tehran’s bickering leaders will happily or grudgingly accept depending on circumstances and political positions, probably with little concern or ability to do much for additional Palestinians who lose lives or are made miserable in their names.

Even if Hamas inside Gaza is fully dismantled—remember the PLO was also forced to pack its bags once and move to Tunis—or the influence of its leadership in exile led by Khaled Meshaal, really the only Hamas leader with whom Iran has any clout, is undermined, there are still others left and a standing, even if presumably weakened Iran, will continue to be a problem because of the other cards it holds from Afghanistan to Iraq to Lebanon. The bottom line is that in the midst of an angry region, even the crushing defeat of a foe such as Hamas for the purpose of weakening Iran does not lead to a strategic overhaul.

More significantly, in the propaganda war waged between “supporters of Israel” and the “resistance camp,” Israel, by the way it has waged the war—whether or not it was forced by Hamas’ method of resistance—has already lost in the arena of “humanity.” This by itself has major consequences in so far as it makes Israel, its politics, policies, and problems—including human rights and permanent insecurity—the center of attention.

And, of course, this will be music to the ears of Iranian leaders who will welcome a respite from being the top attention-getters and “problems” of the world. They are always happy to change the conversation from whether Islamic Iran will survive without changing to whether Israel can survive without a major overhaul in its policies and set-up in the Occupied Territories.

It is true that we are told that a crushing defeat of an enemy as small as Hamas will help build a better Middle East in which the adversary will be weakened and hence will become more pliant and passive. However, common sense tells us that violence is highly unlikely to give birth to passivity. Not when it is watched in living rooms and squalors alike all over the world and not when the resistance camp’s war is waged not only in dark alleys and tunnels but also in the virtual world of the same living rooms and squalors.

But the narrative of an emboldened Iran and the need to weaken it by militarily crushing its so-called proxies persists because the picture of a threatening and emboldened Iran is not only necessary for a dysfunctional Israeli polity always in need of leaders showing their martial grit, but also for another fight—the fight over how to deal with Iran.

As usual, nothing occurs in a vacuum. In each of the three countries heavily vested in the drama—Israel, the United States, and Iran—there are folks who for whatever reasons—it really doesn’t matter anymore whether the reasons are justified or not—are ideologically, institutionally, politically, and economically vested in the continuation of animosity.

Call them hardliners, hawks, radicals, demagogues, war-profiteers or ideologues, polarization is to their benefit and each has its own fears, including loss of power. They operate in the midst of societies in which the population is also divided—again for whatever reason, be it the existence of settlers or cultural rifts—and they are contenders for influence. Theirs is a politics of fear, worry, as well as actual and advocated violence. They are not necessarily a united bunch in their respective countries. In fact, in all three countries, the art of bickering has been perfected, at times to divert attention from fundamental issues at hand. But bickering should not be confused with withdrawal and lack of power.

At the same time, in all three polities, there are also a good number of people and leaders who are either tired of ideological thinking or just simply tired of the consequences of never-ending animosity. In Iran, ideologues were set aside for a few years and there is good reason to believe

that that the kind of politics and foreign policy that was practiced during those years would have had a better chance of lowering tensions in the region after 9/11 had the Bush Administration approached Iran in a more conciliatory manner than it did after the two countries cooperated based on their shared interest in Afghanistan.

But bygones are bygones. What is at hand today is that a reformist or pragmatist is the elected president of the United States backed by a good chunk of American people who have invested in him their hope for re-direction, common sense, and human decency.

For someone like me, an Iranian-American with a vested interest in the reconciliation of the two parts of my identity—for mundane reasons such as easier travel and money exchange as well as bigger ones such as fear of a military attack against the rather extensive family I have left behind—the question is whether trends in the United States will have a better chance at lowering tensions and reducing violence.

The answer obviously rests not with who Barack Obama is—notwithstanding his palpable human decency that has allowed many of us to pin our hopes on him—but what he and his foreign policy team do. It is not the question of goodwill begets goodwill, as George Bush the father once famously said, but whether the still most powerful country in the world can lead by setting an example and itself becoming less ideological, violent, and insecure at a time of global economic crisis that is bound to get worse; and whether the United States can become a more or less competent seeker of solutions or will instead remain wedded to and chained by reactive and reactionary institutions and ideas and dysfunctional relationships. Has it internalized the lessons it learned in the hard way in insurgent Iraq, that in order to improve the situation even in small ways you need to understand and engage with your political and cultural environment? And, finally, has it learned that the United States cannot bomb or force its way out of difficult circumstances entailing complementary, conflicting and crisscrossing interests among a variety of countries including the United States?

Having watched Iranian politics and foreign policy closely for years, I am convinced that despite all the hurled insults and maneuvering, a change of direction in American foreign policy will impact Iran in significant ways. This is because, with one major caveat, Iran's assessment of its security environment has not changed since prior to 9/11. For years Pakistan has been considered Iran's number one threat for the same reason that it is about to preoccupy the new American president: potential instability of the country.

The major caveat of course comes with the insertion of American forces in the region, increased animosity of the Bush Administration, and the increased possibility or at least talk of a confrontation between Iran and Israel and even the United States. Iran's nuclear program has played a useful tool in framing the confrontation in recent years but the Iranian leaders, rightly or wrongly, have never had any doubts about what this confrontation is about: the survival of the Islamic republic and acceptance of its regional role.

Iranian leaders of all variety have been sending messages that they are ready to engage in serious conversation about redefining Iran's role in U.S. regional policies for years. The language of neither servant nor enemy, often interspersed in Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei's sermon, gives clues about the kind of relationship Iran seeks with the United States. The more overtly political leaders like Parliament speaker Ali Larijani have been more to the point: "If the Americans think they can approach Iran instrumentally through tactical change, they are wrong," he said. A "strategic conversation" is a different matter.

The point being made is that instead of the attempted pitting of the region against Iran and search for security at its expense, the United States will be better off accepting Iran's appropriate

regional role, which should be commensurate with its geographical size, resources, and regional political clout.

Tehran's reaction to events in Gaza confirm this message and has included a combination of theatrics, genuine expression of sorrow, a bit of diplomacy—much of it with Syria which has a bigger stake in the Israeli-Gaza conflict and Turkey which also has a bigger stake because of its close relations with Israel in the face of a population angered by the Gaza tragedy—and a good dose of wait and see attitude. This is a bed the Israelis have made for themselves and they are the ones that have to figure out a way to tidy it. This is why Iran's chief of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Mohammad Ali Jaafari, rather calmly ruled out providing military support to Hamas, saying "Gazan resistance does not need other countries' military help."

Iranian leaders are not stupid. They also worry about Israel being "emboldened" and increased tension with key Arab states with which they have tried to mend relations in recent years. But generally speaking they think that Israel is digging its own grave by going into Gaza. This is what Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad means when he says that Israel will wither away in the pages of history; it will fall, based on its own contradictions and policies. If the Iranian media machine and leaders can help heighten those contradictions, they will happily oblige, but actual entanglement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the sake of the conflict itself is not of interest to Iran.

Tehran's game is one of expression of genuine anger and resentment—it is hard to be from that part of the world and not be angry at what is being seen on television—and playing to the crowd in the virtual world. On this latter front, the real targets are Arab regimes— Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and not Israel per se. The intent is to use the support for Iran's anti-Israeli position in the Arab street as an instrument for preventing the creation of an anti-Iranian front by Arab governments. Iran's leaders would be stupid and delinquent to only play the wait and see game and ignore the possibility that the Obama administration will essentially follow the Bush Administration policy of trying to pit the region against Iran and search for security at its expense.

But playing to the crowd has its limits, at least inside Iran. People were encouraged to demonstrate and volunteer to be sent to Gaza after Ayatollah Khamenei had declared anyone dying for the cause of Gaza will be considered a martyr. But after the demonstrations began to entail attacks of foreign embassies, they had to be told publicly by his representative to the universities to calm down and respect international laws and treaties.

And when volunteers for Gaza sat in the Tehran airport and angrily demanded of government officials that they be sent to Gaza "to fulfill the leader's command," again they were told in no uncertain terms that their task was consciousness-raising and moral support. The supreme leader himself acknowledged Iran's hands were tied while blessing and thanking the volunteers for their dedication in a simple one-liner.

The bottom line message: Palestine is not as important to us as you think. This is a message that Iran has in fact been consistent on since the early days of the Islamic Republic. Palestine has been mostly treated as a Palestinian issue, then an Arab one, and finally an Islamic one. It only becomes important for ideological purposes and to counter what is considered to be attempts that are intended to create regime or territorial insecurity for Iran. If you don't believe us, Iranian officials hint, just compare our energetic behavior and policies in Iraq and Afghanistan—countries of high interest for security reasons—to our rather lackadaisical approach to the Gaza conflict.

Another message: We are not about to let angry crowds run our foreign policy. Like other countries with a cause—including Israel and the United States— Iran has its true believers in the cause of the Iranian state as the leader of Islamic resistance. But those who run Iran have shown,

at least until now, that they have an uncanny ability to control and lead the opinion of their hard-line base.

As is often the case, the Iranian regime may be over-playing its hand and expecting too much. Perhaps the Bush Administration's support for the continuation of violence in Gaza is intended as a parting gift to Obama. A crushed Hamas, the thought goes, will weaken Iran's hand in the impending talks with the United States and as such must be accepted as an Israeli gift. Surely the people of Gaza are the not first to be sacrificed at the altar of geopolitics.

Given the added drop in oil prices and the disaster Ahmadinejad's presidency has brought to the Iranian economy, the Obama Administration may also be tempted to go further and play hard-ball, thinking that a weaker Iran is an Iran that will finally say yes to demands that it has said no to throughout the Bush Administration. If reports are true, there are quite a few among both Barack Obama's and Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton's advisors who are intent on such an approach.

Within this framework, Obama's new Iran policy will just be a variation—or more accurately a more robust version—of the policies that have been going on for many years. In this new iteration, the presumption is that a little more pressure along with more incentives will do the trick and alter the Iranian resolve to enrich uranium . Perhaps! One can never speak in absolute terms about the future.

But if it doesn't, we will be facing an uglier Iran in the future that is bound to be even more problematic for the United States and Israel, indeed risking a war. An Iran pressured to do what it does not want to do, in all likelihood, will also be an angrier and more hard-line Iran with enough tools to cause trouble in the region.

Those of us who advocate some sort of compromise with Iran, based on a process of give and take that focuses less on zero enrichment in Iran and instead searches for guarantees that prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state, do so on the premise that comprehensive diplomatic engagement with the intent of turning a long-standing foe into an on-and-off partner, working alongside the United States on intractable regional problems based on shared interest, will be good for Iran, the United States, and ultimately the region because it will have to be based on a process in which broad spectrums of the public and elites in both countries end up being okay with the compromise.

Reaching such an acceptance inside Iran is harder because it is the country under pressure to give in on what its broad public has come to consider via propaganda or historical memory as a right. It will certainly not come about if the United States enters negotiations with Iran with another set of red-lines and deadlines, demanding full suspension of enrichment within a specified time frame.

Even if Iran's leaders buckle under and agree to limits they have not agreed to in the past, without broad public acceptance, a group of unhappy troublemakers will continue to exist, constantly intending to undermine the new equilibrium which to them will be mainly a concrete and unhappy manifestation of the American will egged on by the Israelis. Were these folks insignificant in Iranian society, in terms of numbers and power, there would not be a reason for worry. But they are not.

The Obama Administration can continue to ignore Iran's domestic politics as well as regional resources and negotiate in order to put Iran in its place in the same way the Israelis and its American enablers have ignored Palestinian politics and the reality of occupation, repeatedly and catastrophically pinning their hopes on the breaking of the Palestinian will to resist.

Or, it can change course. It can begin approaching the region with the objective of solving conflicts, rather than picking fights and sides. It will of course not be easy to go against interests that are vested in conflict. But given the disaster that the Middle East has become, no one is asking for a lot at this point; just a sense that a different kind of approach is being contemplated and hopefully tried.

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